



*a novel*

*with  
every  
memory*

JANINE ROSCHE

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JANINE ROSCHE

  
Revell

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For those who have fought the good fight—  
for your recovery and healing, for your dreams,  
for your identity, for your children, for the memory  
of those who have passed on, or for your marriage—  
whether you were able to find restoration or not,  
this book is for you.

## *author's note*

This novel contains difficult and potentially triggering topics, such as death of a child, sexual assault, adultery, and divorce. I have tried to handle each of these issues with sensitivity while also showing the reality of trauma in the family system. If you have experienced loss, adultery, or divorce, I recommend seeking professional help through the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy: [www.aamft.org](http://www.aamft.org).

If you or someone you know has experienced rape or sexual assault, please contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline at (800)-656-HOPE (4673) where you can access a range of free services, including:

- confidential support from a trained staff member
- support finding a local health facility that is trained to care for survivors of sexual assault and offers services like sexual assault forensic exams
- someone to help you talk through what happened
- local resources that can assist with your next steps toward healing and recovery
- referrals for long-term support in your area
- information about the laws in your community
- basic information about medical concerns



## LORI

Even the best makeup couldn't hide the fact that I'd been raised from death to life. A sound—half chuckle and half sigh—skimmed my lips as I placed my Givenchy powder and brush in my travel case. If Deirdre, my favorite nurse, heard my thoughts, she'd tell me to display my scars proudly, as I was "a walking testimony of the good Lord's mercy and grace." A walking testimony. She'd never caught the slip, and I'd never called attention to it.

I placed the travel case in the basket on the front of my walker and then began my trek to my chair. I'd no sooner caught my breath than a knock sounded at the door. "Come in."

"Good glory, Ms. Lori!" Deirdre sauntered through the doorway like she was wearing a gold-breasted choir robe instead of the same green scrubs all the nurses at the rehab center wore. She spread her arms wide and let the door swing behind her. "Are you excited? It isn't every day you get a second chance at life."

"I am excited. To sleep in my own bed, cook my own food, read with my childr—" I swallowed hard as reality struck. "My daughter."

"That sounds wonderful."

I checked my watch. Nearly nine. "I should make sure I have everything." I readied myself to stand, prompting Deirdre to quickstep to my side and offer her arm as a support. With a

flick of my hand, I waved her off. “I must get used to doing all this on my own. May as well start now.”

Using the armrests as support, I leaned forward and pushed with my legs. Fire ripped through my quadriceps—a feeling I’d learned to appreciate. Months ago, I’d felt nothing in those muscles at all. After I straightened, I waited for vertigo to come. It didn’t, thank heavens. Perhaps it had slept in. Meanwhile I’d been awake since four.

“Don’t push yourself too hard now or you’re likely to end up right back here.” Deirdre watched my slow progress. “Your baby girl may think she’s grown, but she still needs her momma.”

My lips were too taut for my smile to feel genuine.

Deirdre looked over the tray holding my hardly touched breakfast. “Now, now, Ms. Lori. Your hubby might be a feast for the eyes, but you’ve still got to eat real food.”

“I tried. My nerves had other ideas. I’d rather not start my ‘second chance’ by getting sick all over myself or Michael.” With the help of my walker, I shuffled my cashmere-slipped feet over to the large window of my suite—the best money can buy, Michael had called it once. How long ago was that? Was it even Michael who’d said it? I brushed the voile curtain back to see the sunlight sparkling on Denver’s South Platte River, yet an even better image caught my attention. In the parking lot below, Michael shut the door to his Lexus. After all his visits to the rehabilitation center, I still expected to see the beat-up Honda since my brain only occasionally acknowledged the eight years prior to our accident.

I closed my eyes and went through my mental checklist: the month and year, the current president, my age, the names of the living members of my family, and the facts of my situation. Each answer tugged harder on my heartstrings, but I wouldn’t give in to tears. This was a big day, so I shoved away the consuming sadness and focused on that tall, dark, and handsome man casually walking toward the clinic’s entrance.

“Why are you anxious?” Deirdre asked.

My stomach twisted. “Because I know it won’t be how it was.”

“What if it’s better?”

She tried to pat my shoulder, but I shirked away from her touch. “Better? After all I lost, how could it possibly be better?”

“I’m only thinking the Lord’s not through with the Mendenhalls yet. With the way you helped us redecorate these rooms to look less like a morgue and more like one of those flippity-flop home shows, I bet you could make quite a name for yourself as an interior designer.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I can handle any more of his plans.”

“After all you’ve accomplished here? ‘Course you can. When the hospital transferred you in January, you couldn’t walk, talk, or remember your name. Look at you now.”

I cast a glance at my reflection in the window’s glass. Like I did dozens of times a day, I fussed with the hair near my scar, brushing it forward. Did I have time to grab a scarf from the wardrobe? I had to try. The leg of my walker caught on the chair when I went to turn. It took several jarring shimmies to get it facing the other way.

While Deirdre prattled on about the importance of slow, deliberate movements, I shuffled to the wardrobe as quickly as possible and pulled the door open. Empty.

“Where—”

“We packed most of your stuff yesterday.” Deirdre knew better than to add the “remember?” part because, clearly, I didn’t. “I’ll pack up your toiletries so you two don’t linger here one minute longer than you have to. Mr. Handsome is bound to be in a hurry to get you home.” She winked at me as she headed to the bathroom.

Warmth flooded my cheeks. My eyes caught something on the top shelf of the wardrobe. I slid the paper toward me and



picked it up, finding one of the family photos they'd used for my memory work. My favorite memory. The moment I'd recovered it in therapy had been almost as happy as the day it had occurred. It was Easter Sunday, and the church had set up a backdrop for pictures. Austin and Avery were three. He wore light blue-and-white seersucker overalls with a hand-embroidered turtle on the front pocket. Avery wore a blue dress with pink tights, black Mary Janes, and a sparkly red bow—always the fashionista. They sat together on a bench, holding hands. Austin had insisted on it. And Michael? He was the most dashing man who'd ever dashed. He'd opted for his favorite pose with me. He'd stood behind me, slid his hands over mine, then wrapped me in an embrace.

"Hey."

The voice jolted me, and the photo slipped from my fingers as I looked up. Fifteen years after that photo was taken, Michael stood on the threshold, not an ounce less handsome but much farther away. His gaze wasn't on me but the stack of Michael Kors suitcases he'd had delivered last week. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, I believe so. Deirdre is getting the last of my things from the bathroom."

Finally, his focus found my face, and his eyes widened. He closed the distance between us in only two strides. His fingertips gentled my neck, turning my chin slightly. "When did you get this bruise? What happened?"

"On Sunday," I said, "after visiting hours ended. It was nothing. I thought I could get to the bathroom without my walker, but I fell and bumped my chin on the floor." No need to tell him about the cut on the inside of my bottom lip or the massive headache the fall summoned.

"Why didn't someone tell me?" His glare demanded an answer. "This place is supposed to be the best in Colorado—"

"Michael." I used my softest voice, hoping to recapture his focus. It didn't work the way it used to. Then again, I was no

longer the beauty queen he'd fallen for. "I asked them not to call you. It was my fault."

He looked at me from beneath his pinched brow. His hands dropped from my neck and secured my waist in his strong grasp. There was no way I could fall now. "Should you be standing? I can get a wheelchair."

"I'm fine." I wrapped my hands around his upper arms, noticing how much more muscular he was now than in our early years of marriage. When had fitness become so important to him? Since the accident? Or during the part of our life I couldn't remember?

"Don't push yourself too hard, Lori." His eyes, walnut-hued and rimmed by dark lashes, did more than ask me to be careful. They implored me to. The concern radiated through me, stunting my ability to speak.

Instead, I offered a slight nod. Not sure how much more careful I could be than living in a rehabilitation center all this time, never once leaving to go shopping or to get coffee. Maybe the command was meant for when I returned home. Or when I got in the car. With a lifetime of memories swirling about my brain like specks of dust in a tornado, I wasn't sure of anything anymore, except that no place was completely safe. Not even my husband's embrace.

After I assured him I was good to stand on my own, he kneeled and picked up the photograph I'd dropped.

"I nearly forgot that picture when I packed my things," I told him, leaving out how I had no memory of packing at all.

"Hmm," Michael said after a quick examination. "When was this, again?"

"Michael," I said, "I'm the one with a traumatic brain injury."

"You know me and these things. The kids were, what, five here?"

"They were three."

He stared at the picture the way he might analyze stock dividends.

Grief, my therapist had said, is rarely handled in the same manner by everyone, and we must be careful not to judge. That didn't make my heart ache any less.

Deirdre walked into the living area. "Well, Mr. Mendenhall, your queen is ready to leave one castle for the next." She extended the handle on the largest suitcase. "We sure are going to miss her around here."

"Not as much as she'll miss you, I'm sure." Michael's million-dollar smile—another change that had developed in the span of time I couldn't recall—had its effect on Deirdre. She started fanning herself exaggeratedly. When he glanced back at me, though, the smile fell. "I'll go get a wheelchair."

"I told you he'd be in a hurry to get you home," Deirdre said with a chuckle.

"Yes, I'm sure that's it." I fidgeted with my hair again.

After one last check passed from Michael to the clinic's administrator, the fanfare began. Patients and staff who had become my friends lined the third-floor hallway, waving their goodbyes. The ones who could stand offered hugs. Suddenly, I was thankful for the wheelchair. These people had comforted me at my lowest moments, like the day I was informed my son—my precious Austin—hadn't survived the crash that I'd just barely come through. And these people cheered for me every time I relearned something the doctors had said I'd never again do. Saying goodbye was hard.

Still, it wouldn't be as hard as the missing hello back at home.

In the car, Michael was quiet.

"I thought Avery might come with you." I ran my hand over the smooth leather upholstery. This car looked more like a New York City limousine than a family vehicle. Hadn't he and Avery been doing family things while I'd been at the clinic recovering?

Other than visiting me every other weekend, I mean. Avery, it seemed, never enjoyed the visits. It was out of her comfort zone, I told myself each time, which was okay. I was sure the place would have grown on her if I had to stay much longer. Avery wasn't nearly as happy-go-lucky as Austin, but once they had settled into a place or activity, Austin had always helped Avery come around. And when that girl smiled, the sun may as well take a rest. Unfortunately, that was a light I hadn't seen in a long time.

"This is the last day of summer," Michael said. "I thought I'd let her sleep in one more time before the school year starts."

I closed my eyes and willed my brain to work. The current year minus the twins' birth year. That made Avery—

"It's her senior year," Michael whispered as if saying it at a normal volume would embarrass me for not recalling my only surviving child's age.

"Thank you." I unlocked my cell phone and scrolled through the most recent photos that Michael had uploaded of Avery. "I hate that I can't remember."

"That's all right. I'm here to help you, babe." He reached over and patted my knee twice, then settled his hand on my thigh long enough for its heat to burn through my lounge pants. There had been a time when he'd thought I was pretty. Back in my Miss Colorado Teen days. Back when my hair had been the color of the Great Sand Dunes and there wasn't a four-inch-long C scar above my ear.

His hand tensed and his knuckles arched. Then he pulled his arm away entirely. Could I blame him? I looked nothing like the young twentysomething in that Easter Sunday photo.

Michael cleared his throat. "And I've hired the finest home health-care professionals to come over while I'm at work to get you settled in."

"You're going back to work? How soon?"

He kept his eyes on the road. "I have a meeting this afternoon across town. I can cancel it if I need to."

I swallowed my disappointment like it was a chocolate-covered toad. "No, I'll be fine. It's been a tiring morning, so I imagine I'll rest. Maybe read a book." I laughed coarsely. "Do I still like to read?"

"I hope so. I uploaded the latest book from that author you love onto a new e-reader. You know, the one who writes those love stories set in the 1920s. Do you, uh, remember what an e-reader is?"

"Only because one of the nurses had one."

"You loved yours, but it was in your purse when we . . . Anyway, this one has far better features. Top of the line. It's plugged into the charger on your bedside table."

"Michael, thank you."

He stiffly nodded as we headed north on Highway 93 toward Boulder. Funny how I couldn't remember our address, but I knew every hill and curve of this road. Perhaps funny wasn't the best word. I gazed out the windshield at the mountains rising unapologetically from the plains, capturing the focus of anyone looking west and beckoning them toward their cragged beauty. Thank the Lord I could still recall my childhood climbing boulders and befriending foxes outside our cabin, all while promising Mom I wouldn't skin my knees ahead of pageant day.

We passed the neighborhood where our three-bedroom ranch stood. According to Michael, we moved out of our "starter" house four years ago. Was it too much to hope we'd found a quaint home nestled into a secluded mountainside?

My heart leaped when the Lexus turned west onto a road I didn't recognize. Soon, absurdly large homes came into view. The kind in the home decor magazines I used to fawn over after researching the week's best deals on diapers.

Michael steered the car between sprawling estates, many

of which had horses in adjoining pastures. “Does any of this look familiar?”

My chest tightened, forcing my no out on a breath.

We pulled onto a driveway that led to a sleek home, mountain-style but modern, with sharp eaves, large windows, and textures of lumber and stone. Beautiful and entirely unrecognizable. My eyes stung, and I turned away from Michael.

“Lori, it’s okay.” His typically deep voice rose in pitch and softened. “Take it one day—”

The car stopped abruptly, and my body pitched forward until the seat belt lashed my chest and neck. I threw my hands up to shield myself from the steel and glass I expected to strike my face. Piercing noise assailed my eardrums as my vision went blindingly white then black.

A decorative graphic consisting of several small, stylized bird silhouettes in flight, scattered across the upper right portion of the page.

## *two*

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.” Michael cursed.

I opened my eyes to daylight and lowered my hands slowly. A woman with pretty, yet quite unnatural-looking red hair stood in front of the car’s nose and waved at me.

“Are you all right?” He curled his hand around the back of my neck, his warmth providing instant calm to my muscles.

“Yes,” I said. I’m okay. I’m safe. It was . . . a memory, I think.

“Wait here.” Michael jammed the shifter into Park and jumped out of the car, letting the door’s slam add an exclamation to the unflattering word he called the woman. The woman rounded the bumper, heading toward me. I leaned away from the window.

Michael stepped between the stranger and my door. “I told you to come by next week. This is already a lot for her to take in. She doesn’t need to worry about entertaining neighbors.”

“I’m her best friend, Michael, and I’ve missed her.”

“You can see her next week.” Slightly muffled, Michael lowered his voice. “She may not even remember you.”

“All the more reason to let me talk to her. For goodness’ sake, at least let me hug her.” She reached for the door handle, but Michael blocked her way. “What? Are you afraid of what I might tell her?”

I strained to hear Michael’s response. There was only silence though. After a long pause, the woman responded. “Fine. I’ll wait another unnecessary week to see her. Tell her that I’ll drop off a cooler on the front stoop tomorrow night with salad and

gazpacho in it. She should know that someone actually cares about her.”

After the woman had crossed the neighboring lawn and disappeared inside a Spanish-style, stucco home, Michael reclaimed the driver’s seat. “Sorry about that. Let’s get you inside.” He drove the car into the opened garage, ensuring the door was shut before he cut the engine.

“She doesn’t seem to like you much,” I said, unbuckling my seat belt and turning toward him. “Who is she?”

“Enid Lowry. Her husband is a professor at the university. Margot, her daughter, was in band with Austin. You and Enid were close the last few years.”

The tears I’d held back all morning grew angry and hot as they raged down my cheeks. I closed my fists and dug my knuckles into my thighs. “I can’t remember my best friend. I can’t remember my home. I can’t remember losing my son.”

As my body shook with sobs, Michael left the car, left me. How was I expected to do this? I shouldn’t have been discharged from the clinic. I’d told Dr. Klein I wasn’t ready for this, but he’d insisted I was. What did he know anyway?

My door opened. Michael leaned inside and stroked my face. “It’ll be okay. I promise you, it will.” If I searched hard enough, I could still see that fresh-faced boy who’d said those exact words to me years ago when I was a frightened, pregnant beauty queen in a borrowed veil. He slid one arm beneath my legs and one behind my back, scooping me up like I was a child. I curled into him. This Michael I remembered. This Michael was the man I loved.

After carrying me to the entry door, he fumbled with the doorknob, using the hand of the arm under my knees. He pushed the door open wide, revealing a brightly lit mudroom. “It’s like the old days—me carrying you over the threshold.”

“I remember.” And I did. I held his gaze as long as possible. He carried me through the mudroom and into a generously



spaced kitchen with hickory floors, open shelving, and copper accents. Beyond that, a cozy family room brought the outdoors in with large windows and an unobstructed view of the mountains. Michael situated me on a suede couch the color of a caramel macchiato. Everything was so lovely I was afraid to touch it. This place even smelled expensive, like bergamot and rum, although I didn't see a single candle.

Warbled rock music—"Free Fallin'," maybe—blared from the upstairs. Not all things had changed. With the help of the familiar chorus, I relaxed, allowing the pleasantly worn couch cushions to cradle me in comfort. Due to Avery's loud music, I didn't hear the slow and rhythmic clacking sound until it was nearly upon me. Before my brain could process the sound, a white-blond dog lumbered over.

"Wynton?" Whenever I had imagined coming home, I had expected the Labrador to greet me with puppy kisses and annoying tail thumps. Instead, the old boy took his time coming my way. Though it seemed to have lost its power, his tail still wagged happily. I welcomed him with a hug and dug my fingers in the dog's soft fur. Austin's dog. He'd begged us for one for his tenth birthday. That was only seven years before the accident. Seven. Progress. I kissed Wynton's forehead, leaving a mauve lip print between his eyes.

*Bang, bang, bang.*

I jerked my head up to see Michael pounding on the wall of the staircase.

"Avery, Mom's home!" Michael turned back to me, a sheepish expression rippling his brows. "Sorry. She can't ever hear me over her music." He crossed the room and knelt before me to remove my shoes one at a time. After that, he retrieved a blanket from a cabinet. He unfolded it and placed it over my legs with care and strange precision, tucking it around my feet and knees. He must've caught on that I never seemed to be warm enough these days. The title lyric to Salt-N-Pepa's

“Whatta Man” randomly popped into my head, then saddened me. After all, I could remember a song from high school better than my supposed best friend. When Michael had finished caring for me, he straightened, pinning his hands to his hips and peering up the stairs.

There was a time when my homecoming would have been greeted by tiny feet pitter-pattering as the twins jockeyed for the first hug. These footsteps were slow. Hesitant, even. Avery descended the steps and came around the couch, finally pausing in front of me. My little fashionista now wore plain black shorts and a cropped T-shirt that read “Colorado Bandmasters All-State Band.” Like when she’d visited the clinic, her hair hung limp against her pale skin and indifference seemed to mar her once-smiley face.

“Hi, Mom.”

I extended my arms to her. “I’ve missed you, sweetie.”

Her chin puckered, and her bottom lip pushed forward. She flung herself down, practically onto my lap. “You too,” she whispered, softening against me. She buried her nose in my blouse and the steam of her breath warmed my skin through the fabric. I heard her snuffle.

The longer she held me, or perhaps the longer I held her, the more my eyes blurred with tears. How many times in the hospital and rehab center had I longed for these mommy hugs from Austin and Avery?

She pulled away and returned to standing before I had time to fully soak in the embrace. Avery swiped at her cheeks. “Can I go back to my room now?”

“Avery.” Michael’s warning tone earned him a knowing glance from the girl.

“I’m glad you’re home, Mom.” Hurriedly, she retraced her path back to the stairs and out of sight.

All kinds of questions caught on the tip of my tongue. What had my girl been going through since the accident? What had

it been like for her to lose her mother temporarily and her twin brother . . . for life? And when had our bond become so strained?

"Don't worry about her," Michael said. "It's all that teen angst. She'll come around."

"I hope so." I scratched Wynton behind his ear while Michael stood across the room, unmoving, for a good thirty seconds until an Aerosmith song began blaring.

"I'll tell her to turn it down," Michael said.

"Don't bother. I don't mind. So, she still has a thing for the '80s?" My heart squeezed remembering the night I drove Avery out to the Red Rocks Amphitheater when she was in third grade. We couldn't afford concert tickets so we parked on the shoulder of a private road, sat on the roof of our car, and listened to Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers off in the distance.

"She inherited that from you. Awful stuff, but it's better than what's popular now. I think it's how she feels closest to you." His hand raked through his thick hair once, twice. Strong as he was, he seemed unable to bear the weight of his shoulders, and they hunched forward as he paced the room. Finally, he sank onto the couch cushion by my side, caressing my blanketed knee with his thumb. "I didn't want to worry you with this while you were at the clinic, but Avery's going through a rebellious stage. She doesn't listen to me. Doesn't hang out with any friends. Doesn't want to go to school."

"Is it angst or grief?" I asked, careful to keep my voice from carrying.

"Honestly, I don't know."

"Don't you two talk? You've been alone here for ten months."

"If I let her, she'd never leave her room."

"Maybe things will get better now that I'm home. I have faith."

"That's good. Your faith has gotten us through hard times before." Michael forced a smile but just a quick one. He dropped his hand from my knee. When had he grown so weary? Was it after the accident? Before?

“Besides,” I added, “if her room is as amazing as the rest of this house, I can’t say I blame her for never wanting to leave it.”

“It is amazing. You designed it, after all. You designed this entire house. Every light fixture, every faucet. You worked closely with our builder to make it your dream home. It kept you busy for nearly three years.”

“Oh.” The home was beautiful. But it was also . . . excessive. Like there had been an emptiness I’d been trying to fill with swanky finishings and magazine-worthy couture. An emptiness that seemed to hover just below the faith I carried, waiting for the ice to crack and for me to fall into its abyss. I squeezed my eyes tight and recalled snippets of a conversation we’d had during my stay at the clinic. “How can we afford this again?”

“The switch to wealth management has been bountiful. I manage the portfolios of some high rollers all along the Front Range. With big risk came big rewards.”

“I see. You must have worked very hard for this.”

“Absolutely.” He didn’t smile or show any sense of pride in his accomplishments. Instead, there was a lingering sadness in his expression.

“Don’t you miss teaching at the high school? You used to love it.”

“I don’t miss worrying about how I’d provide for you and the kids.” He expelled a breath.

A phone buzzed. Michael retrieved his from his pocket and stared at the screen. “I have to take this. Excuse me.” He’d barely gotten his words out before he left through the front door.

Upstairs, Aerosmith yielded to U2’s “With or Without You.” Oh, my sweet, hurting girl.

Despite the August sunlight outside, this house felt cold. Where was the texture? The welcoming paint colors? Houseplants? Family photos? Hotel rooms felt more personal than this space. And the kitchen looked brand-new. Hadn’t anyone

cooked a meal in it? He'd said I designed every detail. My head spun. Who on earth was I in those lost years?

Michael returned only to jog up the steps. Bono went silent, and Avery's groan sounded in his place.

Michael's voice came next. "I need you to watch your mom while I go to a meeting. This isn't a question. You're doing it or you're grounded."

Her coarse laugh sent a barb straight into my chest.

"How about this, then? You're doing it or I'm making you go out."

I didn't hear her response.

Wynton padded to the bottom of the steps and looked up. As heavy footsteps descended, his tail wagged. Michael passed right by him. "One of my clients is in the hospital," he told me. "His family is after his money, so I need to see what's going on with his account. Avery will be down soon." He went to the kitchen table and gathered items into a laptop bag.

A minute later, Avery reappeared in the room. She flopped down into the easy chair, then fumbled with the television remote and started scrolling through an assortment of movies until she landed on *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*. "This used to be one of your favorites. A long time ago."

I nodded. "Why do you say it like that?"

Avery shrugged while giving me a sidelong glance. "People change."

Michael returned to kiss the top of my head, nearly touching my scar. Instinctually, I ducked to the side a bit. It wouldn't do to gross him out on my first day home. Michael, however, didn't notice. After a quick check of his watch, he rubbed his hands together. "Is there anything I can get you? Water, coffee, uh, toast? I think there's some pad thai in the fridge."

"Nothing right now. Thank you."

"You sure?" he asked.

"I'm home now. I'll be fine."